

Questions and Answers

2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy

Q1. What does NAAL measure?

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) examined English-language literacy among adults ages 16 and older living in the United States. The assessment focused on authentic, everyday tasks American adults regularly encounter. NAAL defines literacy as “the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” It assessed three literacy areas: prose, document, and quantitative. A nationally representative sample of more than 19,000 adults was assessed in their homes, including a prison sample of nearly 1,200 inmates.

Q2. Why does NAAL measure literacy in English only?

A 1988 congressional mandate and the 1991 National Literacy Act require us to evaluate the status and progress of adults’ English literacy. The 2000 Census shows that Spanish is the predominant language (about 57 percent) among those who speak a language other than English. Among those who do not speak English well or at all, about 71 percent speak Spanish. We accommodate these Spanish-speaking adults in the NAAL screener, background questionnaire, core assessment, and Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment (ALSA) through a bilingual (English/Spanish) interviewer. In 1992 assessment, an estimated two percent of sample could not take the English literacy assessment because they did not speak English or Spanish.

Q3. How did you determine the three literacy domains—prose, document, and quantitative—to be measured?

Literacy is a multifaceted set of skills that adults use throughout their lives to meet a host of personal, social, and workplace needs involving retrieval of information from printed or written material. It was from this perspective that the National Assessment of Adult Literacy and its predecessors were developed.

Reading is a primary facet of literacy, as it enables adults to *use printed and written information* to function in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential. The structure of prose passages, such as editorials, is different from the structure of documents such as charts and forms. Quantitative literacy was also included since adults are often required to use printed information to perform basic arithmetic calculations (such as reading a label on a can of paint and determining how much paint to buy for a 20- by 30-foot room). Three scales were developed—a prose literacy scale, a document literacy scale, and a quantitative literacy scale.

Q4. How is the term *nonliterate in English* defined?

The *Nonliterate in English* category identifies all adults lacking literacy in English. Non-native speakers of English may be literate in their first language even though their English skills may be poor. This is why we use the term *nonliterate in English* as opposed to *illiterate*. The category includes two groups of adults: (1) adults who have English literacy skills so low that they are unable to participate in the assessment at all; and (2) adults who are unable to take the main part of the assessment because it is too difficult for them, but who are able to take the alternative assessment specifically designed for the least-literate adults.

Q5. How many adults in the United States are *nonliterate in English*?

Among adults selected to participate in the 2003 NAAL, five percent were either unable to participate in the assessment at all or were qualified to take the alternative assessment designed for the least literate adults. The adults (over 19,000) who participated in NAAL represented a U.S. adult population of about 222 million. This means that approximately 11 million adults who were age 16 and older and lived in households or prisons in 2003 were *nonliterate in English*.

Q6. What is the profile of the five percent of adults classified as *nonliterate in English*?

Of the 11 million adults in the *nonliterate in English* category, approximately 4 million adults would have been unable to participate in the assessment at all because they knew neither English nor Spanish, the two languages spoken by interviewers in most areas. Another 7 million adults would have qualified for the alternative assessment. Of the latter group, 4 million were Hispanic. The Hispanic group combined with the 4 million who would have been unable to participate at all, represent about 8 million adults in the *nonliterate in English* category who are non-native speakers of English. While some of these individuals are able to identify letters, numbers, and simple words and phrases, most are unable to read and comprehend connected text in English.

Q7. Why were the 2003 literacy performance levels developed?

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) originally used five literacy levels to report the 1992 results. In preparation for reporting on adult literacy performance in 2003, we asked the National Research Council (NRC) to evaluate the original 1992 literacy levels and recommend a set of performance levels for 2003 reporting, if necessary.

The main reason we asked NRC to evaluate the 1992 levels was the inability to make distinctions among those grouped in Level 1, the lowest level of literacy. It was not clear whether relatively poor performance was due to lack of basic (word-level) reading skills or lack of higher-level literacy skills. Available data did not permit detailed analysis of Level 1 performance.

Q8. Aside from procedural differences, how do the 2003 and 1992 levels differ?

The major difference between the 2003 and the 1992 levels is the increased information about performance at the lowest level of literacy for the 2003 assessment. Because the 1992 Level 1 was so broad, it did not inform the public whether poor performance on NAAL was due to a lack of basic reading skills or a lack of higher-level literacy skills. The new *Nonliterate in English* category identifies all adults lacking the minimum basic reading skills necessary to participate in the main NAAL.

The *Nonliterate in English* category can be reported for the 2003 NAAL but not for the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). This is because the 1992 assessment did not include an alternative assessment for the least literate adults, and it is not possible to identify a group of 1992 participants corresponding to those who took the alternative assessment in 2003. Although the 1992 assessment also began with a set of easy tasks, these tasks were fewer and different from the ones used in 2003. In 2003, moreover, questions for the easy tasks could be offered in Spanish, whereas only English was used in 1992.

Q9. Who was included in the 2003 NAAL sample?

The 2003 NAAL sample represents all individuals age 16 and older who live in households or prisons in the United States (as well as in a dormitory, fraternity or sorority dwelling if the student was not at home on break and if the school was located in or around the 160 locations in the US with NAAL interviewers). Based on the Census 2000 data, approximately 99 percent of adults over age 16 lived either in households (about 97 percent), in college dormitories (about one percent), or in prisons (about one percent). The 2003 NAAL results are based on a total sample of 19,300 adults, excluding those who were unable to take the assessment for literacy-related reasons. The sample includes 5,700 adults from states that chose to participate in the state assessments and 1,200 from federal and state prisons. We did not assess adults who lived in institutions other than college dormitories or prisons, such as military barracks, retirement homes, assisted-living homes, and homeless shelters. This is consistent with the assessment procedures of 1992.

Q10. How has the demographic makeup of the adult population assessed by NAAL changed since 1992?

The percentage of White adults in the NAAL population decreased between 1992 and 2003 from 77 to 70 percent, and the percentage of Hispanic adults increased from 8 to 12 percent. The percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander adults also increased, from two to four percent. The percentage of the population that spoke only English before starting school decreased from 86 to 81 percent. The NAAL population was older in 2003, and more adults had completed some postsecondary education or received a college degree.

Q11. What accommodations are offered for adults with special needs?

Accommodations inherent in the design of NAAL aid adults with disabilities, non-native speakers, as well as others. For example, administration is one-on-one; respondents receive additional time if they need it, within reason, and they may use whatever aids they usually use to work with written materials (e.g., a magnifying glass). In addition, we provide several language accommodations tailored specifically for non-native speakers of English. First, the NAAL background questionnaire is administered in English or Spanish, as preferred by the participant. Second, the general instructions and specific questions for the core screening tasks can be given in either English or Spanish, and the general instructions are given orally. Third, adults who are unable to answer a minimum number of literacy screening questions are administered an alternative assessment in which questions are asked orally in either English or Spanish. Nevertheless, printed materials that participants are asked to read are in English only, since NAAL is intended to be an assessment of English literacy. Participants with a native language other than English or Spanish are encouraged to attempt the easy literacy questions even if they cannot complete the NAAL background questionnaire. Finally, (although this is not an accommodation per se) we report separate results for non-English-speaking adults (in addition to combining their score with the overall score) and compare their results with that of native speakers of English. This way, the unique needs of this population may better be inferred.

Q12. Do NAAL literacy scores correspond to grade levels?

Grade-level measures are misleading when applied to adults and are more suitable for children who are developing literacy skills than for adults with a wide range of literacy skills. The diversity and range of skill levels and experience represented by NAAL participants are quite different from the progressive levels of literacy attainment represented by the grade levels of developing young people. NAAL literacy scores summarize performance on various types of tasks of varying difficulty that are encountered by adults from various backgrounds in their daily lives.

The National Center for Education Statistics has no plans to establish grade-level equivalents for the NAAL literacy scores or levels. However, the NAAL performance levels enable us to better understand what a score of 175, for example, means in a couple of ways. First, the levels tell us that someone with a score of 175 falls in the *Below Basic* level—similar to reporting the percentages of students receiving various letter grades. In addition to helping us group adults with similar scores, the levels help us report the typical performance and capabilities of adults falling within various ranges of literacy ability.

Q13. Is there any way to average scores across prose, document, and quantitative literacy so that there is just one score for literacy?

NCES is developing a combined 0-500 scale that will give overall literacy scores to be used in future reports. However, we cannot simply average together the prose, document, and quantitative scores into a single literacy score. Instead, the items from all three scales must be rescaled and reanalyzed. Although the results of all three assessments are displayed on 0-500 scales, the scales were developed separately and a

given score on one scale—225 on the prose literacy scale, for example—does not indicate the same level of performance as 225 on another scale.

Furthermore, the performance levels (*Below Basic*, *Basic*, *Intermediate*, and *Proficient*) were also developed separately for each of the three kinds of literacy. For example, the proportion of adults in the *Below Basic* level on the quantitative literacy scale is larger than the proportion in this level on the other two scales. So, the percentages of adults at each level cannot be averaged to obtain overall performance-level results. Future reports will provide overall literacy composite score results, but not overall performance-level results.

Q14. Does NAAL provide results for all states and counties?

The NAAL sample size is not large enough to provide valid literacy estimates for individual states, except for states that funded an increase in their state sample sizes. However, we are currently developing projections of adult literacy for all states and counties based on any NAAL data collected within those states and counties as well as demographic data from the 2000 Population Census. We plan to post these projections on the NAAL web site in the near future.

Q15. What information and assessment results will be provided in future NAAL reports?

These are only the initial findings from the 2003 NAAL. Later reports will provide additional information about the status and progress of adult literacy, both in the nation as a whole and among key population groups. New components of the 2003 NAAL are providing previously unmeasured and unavailable information on (1) the health literacy of adults (that is, the ability of U.S. adults to apply literacy skills to understand health-related materials and forms); (2) the ability of the least-literate adults to identify letters, numbers, and words, in addition to understand simple prose and documents; and (3) the oral reading fluency of all NAAL respondents in reading aloud from word lists and text passages. These results are reported as national averages as well as by demographic and other characteristics of particular interest to health educators, literacy practitioners, and others. Knowing the specific literacy strengths and weaknesses of the elderly, for example, can raise the communicative quality of materials targeted to them.

Also to be reported are results of a literacy assessment among the nation's prison population and results of state assessments for those states that funded enhanced sampling in their states.